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Archives

Rico told lead contamination manageable

By Ben Murray

Officials from the Environmental Protection Agency last week said that, though Rico has a substantial amount of lead contamination in its soil, the problem is manageable and does not demand the town be slated for Superfund cleanup status.

EPA representatives from Denver visited the town last Friday to give Rico residents and town officials the news, based on preliminary results from soil samples taken in the fall, and reassure residents that the federal agency is willing to work with Rico officials on a cleanup solution.

"We're definitely going to work with the community to figure out all their cleanup options," said EPA community involvement coordinator Ted Linnert, adding that local input would be a "major influence" in ultimately determining the best plan.

Up until the Friday meeting, Rico officials had no idea that the EPA was taking the town's concerns into consideration while forming their cleanup strategy, said Rico Board of Trustees member Jon Kornbluh.

"We were deeply fearful that they were going to act in an uninformed manner," Kornbluh said. But EPA representatives were able to assure them that the federal agency wasn't acting rashly, he said. "To some degree, that fear has been mitigated," Kornbluh said.

Rico officials have been wary of EPA involvement since the agency took interest in the town this fall, and showed up to test for lead, poisons and other contaminants on private and town-owned land in the former mining community.

Officials have been uneasy because of the EPA's authority to name the town a Superfund site in order to provide federal cleanup assistance if the test results proved dangerous.

That designation, Rico officials have said, carries with it a stigma of industrial pollution that could ward off potential business and development in town, halting the tenuous growth the town has seen in recent years and threatening the town's financial future.

Though the preliminary soil test results show that a Superfund designation isn't

likely for Rico, Friday's main speaker, EPA Region 8 Assistant Administrator Max Dodson, said that no option had been ruled out.

"While it's an option, it's not one of the first options that we would choose for this town," Linnert said Monday. The lead contamination is "going to be a very manageable problem," he said.

Kornbluh said EPA officials seemed very aware of the small town's history and concerns when they arrived in town for the public meeting.

"It was nice to hear from [them] that the EPA is cognizant about the level of planning Rico has undergone in the last decade," in terms of municipal infrastructure and environmental work, he said.

This fall, EPA officials collected 58 samples from mostly private property in the town which houses about 40 of Rico's 220 or so residents.

Of those 58 soil samples, 29 showed lead levels of 1,000 parts per million or higher, 39 returned 700 ppm, and 47 samples - a full 81 percent - had levels of 500 ppm or greater.

"Bottom line, there are elevated levels of lead in the soil out there," said Luke Chavez, EPA site assessment manager for the Rico cleanup.

To put those numbers in context, Chavez said, the EPA has overseen cleanup of sites with lead levels as low as 400 ppm, depending on how much of a threat the contamination poses to humans.

At least one site tested, however, showed lead levels more than 200 times what the EPA considers a minimum basis for cleanup - the Propatria Mill site on the western slope of the town directly adjacent to the Dolores River returned a lead level of 91,000 ppm.

The Mill site is a known hot spot for contamination. EPA testers expected to return above-average lead levels, and its extremely high concentration of the metal was anomalous in the study, Chavez said.

"We didn't have other [samples] even close to that level," he said. The average for the soil samples taken from the home sites was around 1,000 to 2,000 ppm, Chavez said.

EPA officials also tested for a long list of other potential contaminants, metals and poisons, including arsenic, but found none of those levels to be of worry.

"Lead was found to be the contaminate of concern," Chavez said.

What will determine which cleanup option the EPA pursues will depend on several factors; a final analysis of the soil samples, the "bioavailability" of the lead (how easily it can be accessed or ingested by people), and the needs and desires of the community.

Chavez said that, though he has seen many sites with contamination like Rico's across the west, the preliminary results don't predispose the town to any one cleanup option or the other. The final results of the soil analysis - expected to be completed in late January - will weigh heavy in the EPA's choice of a cleanup option, as will community input, he said.

"Bottom line, our concern is the risk and the potential risk \$ but at the same time we're very aware of the community's needs and even the economy," he said.

Linnert also said that the final soil results will be crucial to deciding the


program.

"A parts-per-million doesn't mean anything unless you know what kind of lead it is and how it can be absorbed by the body," he said.

But lead cleanup in Rico is a secondary issue to many town officials - they've known for years that lead levels are high in their soil, but recently have been more concerned with the nearby St. Louis Tunnel, which constantly spews forth polluted water into the Dolores River basin.

While Rico clamored for help on solving that problem, the EPA showed up to test lead, prompting theories that the town was being prepped for a Superfund designation. Dodson, however, said last month that the lead cleanup was being treated as an individual issue separate from the St. Louis Tunnel problem.

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